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"The assimilation of the Cajun people has been going on for 250 years. It started as a trickle, then it became a stream, now it's a flood." Zachary Richard

ARTS

BERRY

Gender, race still factors

CONTINUED FROM D1

"I think you have to take it with that grain of salt. That's why after winning, I resisted the feeling of 'Now I only have to do great parts.'"

That kind of attitude didn't get her to where she is today. "I got here by thinking, 'I want to learn and grow. I want to have fun.'"

Monster's Ball – which saw her character plunged into a torrid affair – was part of that learning experience.

"In that movie, I had to face a big nudity issue that was scary to me, but I took the chance to try something new, and I want to keep approaching my career that way. If that leads me towards an action movie, then so be it. If it leads to another great small independent movie (like Monster's Ball), then so be it. I just don't want to be mechanical about it."

That's why she will strenuously defend her involvement in a James Bond film or the much reviled Catwoman. Or – especially – the X-Men films, which she considers to be some of the smartest, most provocative thrillers out there.

But she also believes that actors frequently err in their judgment calls. Ask her what she thought of Catwoman, and her response is swift. "I thought it was one of the best movies ever," she says with a laugh. "I thought that in the world of action movies and comic book movies, it was definitely different from any I had ever seen. It was about a woman being empowered.

"You just never know what people are going to respond to, and I thought women might respond to a character who was that empowered and that strong."

> *"I thought Monster's Ball was going to end my career."*
> Halle Berry

Berry was wrong. However, she was also wrong initially about Monster's Ball.

"I thought Monster's Ball was going to end my career. I thought, 'Oh my God, with this sex scene, I'm going to be toast. This will probably ruin me.' And look what happened. You never know."

Still, during interviews for the current hit X-Men: The Last Stand, journalists suggested to her more than once that she was wasting her talent. So when is she going to do another really good dramatic role?

"Well, here is the thing," Berry says. "I wish that I had the power to create great roles, and I think that after you win the Oscar, people expect that from you. But that's not the reality. I think the great parts are so rare that we're lucky if we get one in this life."

But there's also the problem of gender and race. Berry is a woman. And she is black. Furthermore, she works in a male-oriented industry.

"I think it's so hard for a woman. There are so many great actresses and there should be a lot of great parts, but these parts are really few and far between. And being a woman of colour kind of compounds the issue."

She often hears of a great part out there, but she also hears another message: "Well, Halle is great, but we don't want this character to be black. She's married to a guy who is white."

Berry's response: "What's wrong with that? I have a white mother and a black father."

But the industry always has another answer: "Well, it makes the family look funny and we have these issues. We just don't want to deal with that.

"I hear things like that. It's changing. I would say that today it's better, but it's still a tough nut to crack. It's tough to find a way to change people's minds."

If she was given the power to change the world, she knows what she would do.

"I would get rid of racism."

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FRANCOFOLIES

Zachary Richard weathers the storm

KATRINA ACTION

Cajun artist wants long-term view

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

ALLEN McINNIS THE GAZETTE

"This is not a hurricane show," Richard (pictured at 2004's Montreal jazz festival) says of tomorrow's concert. "But I am making a new album and it just so happens a lot of the songs are about hurricanes."

If the oral tradition is the lifeblood of endangered languages, particularly the Southern American intellectual patois spoken in Louisiana, then the cellphone has been the preferred medium for Zachary Richard to spread news about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Quebec's favoured Cajun singer since the 1970s, the native of Lafayette sounds more at ease talking in this dialect than he does on la belle province's TV talk shows, where his arch French accent has always made him something of a cultural curio.

"It's a long story. I was here for both storms – people tend to forget another hurricane called Rita," he says in perfect storytelling mode. His home wasn't hit: "I was in the crack in the ass between the two hurricanes.

"Starting last September I spent six months organizing fundraisers, created two foundations, one of which is dedicated to helping the schools. Schools, and their French-language programs, were destroyed in the state's heavy Cajun areas (the southwest). The French language is one of the least recognized victims of the storm. Of the 250,000 French speakers in Louisiana, most are over 50, necessitating 30 school immersion programs based on the Canadian model. Even the parents of these kids, their command of the French language is relatively light." He fears the school closures will arrest the Cajun children's linguistic development.

"The assimilation of the Cajun people has been going on for 250 years. It started as a trickle, then it became a stream, now it's a flood. I'm a baby boomer and my dad was in World War II, which was a watershed event for Cajuns because for the first time every male between 18 and 35 was in the army, many of whom had never gone beyond the parish line. They learned English for the first time, and came back wanting a washing machine and car and the emblems of American success. The denigration of French then became a leitmotif in the culture. The language and music were equated with ignorance and poverty.

"Then a whole new young generation, of which I was a part, came along in the '70s and said, 'Hey, screw that, we don't buy this, we're gonna preserve this culture.' It started in the musical community. It still has a lot of support in the community.

"Something that's overlooked is that you can be Cajun and not speak French. There are younger people whose command of French is little to none, but who persist in still being Cajun, proud of their heritage and particular world view."

The challenges of survival post-Katrina bring that heritage into perspective. Richard's matter-of-fact monotone is tinged with tristesse: "The farmers were particularly hard-hit through the salt-water intrusion 50 miles inland. This was rice country, crawfish farming country, and it's ruined for maybe two years. ... For a farmer living on a loan from a bank, that's impossible. ... The cattle industry was desiccated, thousands of head lost and no feed, pastures ruined. ... The gulf is teeming with fish, but in the shrimping industry the price is too low and fuel too high. They're between a rock and a hard place. ... The oil and gas industry is doing great, but for traditional jobs and occupations the government couldn't give a s–t."

> *"We have to listen to nature – we can't just live anywhere we want."*
> Zachary Richard

Richard says New Orleans is "still basically the same as it was nine months ago. At least 50 per cent of the population is missing and probably will not return."

He's disappointed by the recent re-election of Mayor Ray Nagin, who gained attention for accusing George W. Bush of negligence in the storm's aftermath. Richard has been reading The Great Deluge, by historian Douglas Brinkley, which he calls "a scathing indictment on Nagin, who was basically incompetent, incapable of doing anything to protect the people. ... This is an unfortunate thing to say, but I think he played the race card (with) his 'chocolate city' talk. Eighty per cent of the vote was cast along racial lines. It's not because we're white or black or pink or yellow; this guy basically set the reconstruction effort of the city of New Orleans back by 10 years."

He says hard decisions must be made on future cohabitation between New Orleans and Mother Nature: "We can go on building higher levees and parking lots, although within 50 years the whole gulf estuary will be dead. We're losing the equivalent of a tennis court every three minutes to coastal erosion. But the political solution is pure pork barrel, getting everyone's brother-in-law a job.

"People just don't get it: There needs to be a long-term view. We have to listen to nature – we can't just live anywhere we want. We either go for the short term and go back to places nobody really should live in and prepare ourselves for catastrophes on a regular basis, or do something a little bit more enlightened with a long-term perspective that imagines we might be able to have grandchildren that live here too. Frankly, the way things are now, I wouldn't bet on the future of south Louisiana."

The U.S. political response has been "discouraging," he says, but Quebec's has been "warm-hearted," an atmosphere that promises to make Richard's show tomorrow night memorable.

"This is not a hurricane show," he stressed. "But I am making a new album and it just so happens a lot of the songs are about hurricanes. I have to laugh (trying to explain that), because I didn't write any of them after last September. If Katrina hadn't come along, I would've already had the CD out. I'm taking this opportunity to use the audience as guinea pigs for the new material."

Zachary Richard plays tomorrow at 8 p.m. at Théâtre Maisonneuve of Place des Arts. Tickets cost $29.50 to $49.50. Call (514) 842-2112.

Dominique A finds something close to happiness

ANGÈLE BONNET-MAHEDY
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Dominique A is an acquired taste, with a haunting, high tenor that makes him a perennial cult figure on both sides of the Atlantic. On L'horizon, his seventh album since his self-released debut in 1990, M. Ané from Nantes (and now Brussels) trades a little of his irresistible duality – between melancholia and lightness – for a warmth closer to happiness than is normally expected of him.

The title song was inspired by a visit to Greenland, he said recently over the phone before a soundcheck in Brittany, "but it also provided the tone of the album as a whole. It's so open and vast. I write in a spontaneous way without constraint, favouring a certain naturalness. I like to surprise myself."

His solitary intensity on stage, he adds, "comes from the fabulous energy that comes from the experience itself. It's an emotion that's adrenalin-filled; it's totally physical, from within. I do on stage what I expect of other musicians and artists."

Ask him about his cult status and he laughs shyly: "It's a term that amuses me because most of the artists I like are accorded this status. On the other hand, it's a double-edged blade because it's not always a guarantee of longevity. It's different when you live it – you don't need to be liked by everyone to feel fulfilled."

Last year's Francos presented his former lover and long-time interpreter of his songs, Françoiz Breut, who herself has a cult following. "I'm delighted to have contributed to her blossoming. Now she's on her own road, and doing very well, I might add."

They share a love of atmospherics. "I have a need to marry one genre with another – for example, injecting some Killing Joke into Enrico Macias!" He laughs at his little joke, but you half believe him.

Dominique A performs tonight at 7 at the Spectrum, 318 Ste. Catherine St. W., with Albin de la Simone. Tickets cost $24.50. Call (514) 908-9090 for more information.

FRANCOFOLIES

Genre-blending Dominique A enjoys solitude on the fringes.

NOTES

The word "divertissement" seems to have been made for Call Me Poupée, who gave the live premiere of songs from their debut CD, Western Shanghai, at La Zone Molson Dry on Sunday night.

The duo – Ken Fortrel on guitars, Vox organ and beat box and saucy chantoosie Poupée – ooze choice guilty pleasures: surf twang and tremolo, Ennio Morricone, the Ronettes, cheapo sci-fi à la Zappa, and play-nurse sexuality. Poupée began by exclaiming, "I wear a ponytail, symbol of my freedom!" and wound up chanting, "Let's get some K-Y!"

Rose in her hair, wearing a white minidress and matching garters, she was the tease you'd love to meet at any party. Fortrel owned the '70s rockist pose – frizzed hair, scarf, fitted jacket, designer jeans and flaming red guitar. They're not virtuosos – a totally off-key, Spector-inspired Allez Danse drew sympathetic smiles from the few hundred gathered under threatening skies – but they do bear out Noel Coward's observation, "Extraordinary how potent cheap music is."

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Today at FrancoFolies

BEST BETS

Quebec's hottest rock group, **Malajube,** gets its official Francos consecration at Metropolis, 59 Ste. Catherine St. E., at 9 p.m. (with locals **Avec pas d'casque** and France's **AS Dragon**), in a show that promises to be even more of a sonic blast than the band's second CD, Trompe-l'oeil. Club Soda (1225 St. Laurent Blvd.) spotlights francophone world-beat sounds by local heroines **Dobacaracol** and **Christophe Mali,** leader of reggae-popsters Tryo, at 8:30 p.m. Senegalese-Québécoise singer **Senaya,** adept in eight languages, plays at 6 p.m. at L'Aire Ford Focus. Contrasting chanteuses: The gently confessional **Amélie Veille** is at Le Monde Pop Desjardins at 6 p.m., and rockeuse **Anik Jean** serves up slices from her debut, Le Trashy Saloon, at La Zone Molson Dry at 10 p.m.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

THE SHOWS

3 and 5 p.m. Les Petites Tounes, Chapiteau Le Lait stage.
4 and 7 p.m. Le Bestiaire Étincelant, Le Monde Forain Le Lait stage.
5 p.m. Philbert, La Place Loto-Québec stage.
6 p.m. Senaya, L'Aire Ford Focus stage.
6 p.m. Amélie Veille, Le Monde Pop Desjardins stage.
7 and 9 p.m. La Vieille École, Le Monde Hip-Hop Vidéotron stage.
7 p.m. Dominique A, with Albin de la Simone, Spectrum, 318 Ste. Catherine St. W. Tickets: $24.50.
7 and 10 p.m. Toto Laraque, Le Monde multiculturel Hydro-Québec stage.
8 p.m. Da Silva, La Zone Molson Dry stage.
8 p.m. Ben Ricour, Émily Loizeau, La Place Loto-Québec stage.
8 p.m. Carte Blanche à Isabelle Boulay, with Dany Bédar, Paul Daraîche, Stephen Faulkner and others, Théâtre Maisonneuve, Place des Arts. Tickets: $34.50 to $54.50.
8 and 10 p.m. Station 2 x 4, Chapiteau Le Lait stage.
8:30 p.m. Christophe Mali and Dobacaracol, Club Soda, 1225 St. Laurent Blvd. Tickets: $19.50.
9 p.m. Avec pas d'casque, AS Dragon and Malajube, Metropolis, 59 Ste. Catherine St. E., $19.50.
9 p.m. Léoparleur, Le Monde Pop Desjardins stage.
9 and 11 p.m. Les Fils de Teuphu, L'Aire Ford Focus stage.
10 p.m. Anik Jean, La Zone Molson Dry stage.
10 p.m. Cyrz and Nicolas Jules, La Place Loto-Québec stage.
11 p.m. Bazbaz and Damien Robitaille, Spectrum, 318 Ste. Catherine St. W. Tickets: $12.50.
Midnight. RedSyn and Pat the Brat, Full-Franco, Savoy Room (part of Metropolis), 1407 St. Dominique St.

FESTIVAL FACTS

FrancoFolies continues until Sunday. Outdoor shows take place in the area bordered by Ste. Catherine St., President Kennedy Ave., Bleury and St. Urbain Sts. Shows are free unless otherwise noted. For information, go to the website www.francofolies.com or call (514) 876-8989 or 1-(888)-444-9114.

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